



From Mashtots' to Nga'ara

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FROM MASHTOTS‘ TO NGA‘ARA: THE ART OF WRITING AND CULTURAL SURVIVAL IN
ARMENIA AND RAPA NUI.

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Professor Jos Weitenberg was a superb scholar, courteous colleague, and faithful friend. He was also a man of strong principle, who cared deeply for human rights and freedoms and made a practice of his convictions, helping endangered gay Armenians to obtain asylum in the Netherlands and sending masking tape for safe rooms at his own expense to Israeli colleagues when their country faced possible attack with poison gas by an Iraqi tyrant. This essay, dedicated to his blessed memory, considers the way culture and learning helped two peoples to survive assaults on their human dignity and physical survival. I dare to hope he might have liked it. I am grateful to have known him. May his luminous soul rest in everlasting peace.

PREFACE.

This paper* compares the role of newly-invented writing systems and the men who championed them in the cultural survival of two peoples that would at first glance seem to be utterly different— the vast Near Eastern realm of Armenia, at the teeming crossroads of the ancient and modern worlds; and the tiny island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island, Chilean Isla de Pascua) at the eastern edge of Polynesia, in the empty middle of the Pacific, on the other side of the world, the loneliest place of human habitation on the planet. The former is an ancient center of civilization and technology that has flourished for at least three millennia, with a lucid alphabetic script that has endured without significant change for some sixteen centuries; the latter, a stone-age culture whose

* A version of this essay was delivered at the symposium “The Armenians and the Book” commemorating the 500th anniversary of Armenian printing, and in connection with the exhibit of the same name at Lamont Library, Harvard University, and at the Armenian Library and Museum of America, 15th September 2012.

hieroglyphic writing system, of uncertain purpose and possibly recent age, may have been used for only a century and still resists convincing decipherment as a whole. Yet both peoples, the Armenians and Rapanui, have faced with versatility and vigor the most radical challenges to their physical and cultural existence. Both created civilizations of astonishing richness. And it will be seen that for both the art of writing proved crucial to their survival. The unlikely parallels between these two most distant manifestations of human culture are astonishing, even poignant— even as their differences illustrate the diversity of human culture on the planet.

Like many Americans born in the 1950s, I first became fascinated by Easter Island when as a little boy I read *Aku Aku*, the account by the Norwegian archaeologist and explorer Thor Heyerdahl of his journey in his reed boat, the Kon Tiki, from Peru to Easter Island. The island, with its gaunt, cyclopean statues, the *moai*, and its beautiful and enigmatic hieroglyphic script, *rongorongo* (hereafter RR), seemed the very essence of mystery. Easter Island's minute size and utter remoteness in the emptiness of the South Pacific made its vanished classical civilization even more entrancing and exotic. My academic interests in school tended in another geographic direction— towards Russia, then to Armenia and Iran. Although the Apostle Paul enjoins us to give up the things of childhood as we grow, some scholars never do this, and, taking consolation from the example of the great J.R.R. Tolkien, I confess my own prolonged adolescence.

The nine-mile long island is a triangle formed chiefly by three extinct volcanoes: Rano Kao, Terevaka, and Poike; and the moai are of gray volcanic rock starred with green lichen, on grassy hillsides and rocky fields. At fifteen I found myself in a place whose tallest mountain, Ararat, at the time of the Deluge had been the only island on earth, according to the myths of my culture. In history that land was to become isolated in other ways, through language and religion, a rugged Christian island defined by a triangle of three lakes, Van, Sevan, and Urmia, in an Islamic sea: the Soviet Armenian poet Paruyr Sevak (1924-1971) even called his homeland a “mountain-island” (Arm. *leṛnakłzi*). Gaunt red and gray volcanic monuments with patches of lichen stand on its slopes and plains— the *khach'k'ars*, or Cross-stones, with their lacework bas-reliefs and

inscriptions in the exotic Armenian alphabet. And that script, invented by a visionary named Maštoc‘ sixteen centuries ago, has changed little over all that time.

On 5th April 1722, Easter Sunday, the Dutchman Jakob Roggeveen, sailing on the ship *De Afrikaansche Galey*, christened the island after a holiday unknown to its people of a religion they had never heard of. The people he “discovered” probably called their home simply *Te Kainga*, “The Land”; later on they came to call it *Mata Ki Te Rangi* “Eye (looking) at the Heavens”, *Te Pito O Te Henua*, “The Navel of the Earth”, or *Rapa Nui*, “Great Rock” — the latter its proper name today and the one we shall use (the people themselves, and their language, are Rapanui as one word). At its height of its prosperity the population of the island may have hovered around as many as 12,000 souls. But by the last quarter of the 19th century, after colonial exploitation and depredation, the introduction of pandemics, and mass kidnappings into slavery, the population of Easter Island had plunged to barely over a hundred. Its ancient monuments had become neglected ruins, the lofty moai lying face down; its script — the only indigenous writing system of Polynesia! — virtually forgotten; its economy and ecology, utterly shattered; its few remaining inhabitants confined to a walled ghetto on their own land. In the case of Armenia, the country’s gradual isolation from the rest of the world and the impoverishment and degradation of its indigenous population by wave after wave of alien invaders culminated in the First World War in a program of ethnic cleansing unlike anything the Eurasian continent had seen before, leaving nine-tenths of the country desolate. A generation later, the Polish Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the word “genocide” to give a name in law to that crime.

The tiny Pacific island also never faded entirely from one’s thoughts. Over the years I read here and there references to pictographs in medieval Armenian manuscripts that were compared to the hieroglyphic writing system of the ancient Hittite neighbors of the Armenians on the Anatolian plateau, less plausibly to the still-undeciphered hieroglyphic symbols of the ancient Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley, and still less sensibly to the enigmatic RR glyphs of Rapa Nui. In the summer of 2012, being between projects, I decided to revisit that question, examined the evidence, and soon

came to the same conclusion at which sober Armenian philologists had arrived long ago: the very few similarities are entirely fortuitous. The figure of a man or a bird looks much the same from place to place. But the parallels between the two cultures and the place of writing in them turned out to be far more interesting than any diffusionist fantasies; and one carried on reading. This essay is the beginning of the journey.

1. TO THE NAVEL OF THE EARTH: RAPA NUI.

“Monsters dot the coastline. Hollow-eyed beings with elongated ears, weather-beaten skin and pouting lips like sullen children... The end of the world is an accepted fact, and Easter Island is a case in point with its chain of unfortunate events that led to self-destruction; a lemming marooned in the calm of the ocean.”¹

Humans originated in East Africa, diffusing northwards through the Rift Valley into the Middle East and branching from there north to Europe and the Caucasus, and eastwards into Asia. Scholars of palaeo-culture now hypothesize that around 6000 BC migrants from the coast of southeastern China settled Taiwan; and over the next two millennia the Proto-Austronesian culture evolved, with sea voyagers venturing over the Pacific to settle Melanesia around 1300 BC. Polynesians sailing east from Mangareva or nearby islands may first have come to Easter Island in the first centuries of the Christian era; some researchers place the settlement closer to 600-900, though carbon dating favors an early date. The island is the easternmost edge of Polynesia; settlers from the same place(s) of origin settled also Hawai’i, to the north (named after the mythical Polynesian homeland *Hawaiki), and New Zealand in the distant south: the languages of all three island (groups) are closely related (at least by Indo-European standards!), so Maori and Rapanui, for instance, are quite close.² The settlers had to sail against prevailing currents about two thousand miles of open ocean to Easter Island— an astonishing feat. They could scarcely have drifted there by accident. Rather, the place must have been scouted in

¹ Schalansky 2010, p. 100.

² For a good discussion of Polynesian origins, patterns of settlement, and the archaeological record, see Bellwood 1978. The best monograph on the language and its connection to the rest of the Polynesian family is still Churchill and Roussel 1912.

advance before a huge party was sent in huge and heavily laden, ocean-going catamarans to settle the place, making about a hundred miles a day in good weather.

Foundation legend replaces this stage of scouting with a visionary dream by the mythical ancestor Hotu Matu'a, and makes war or inundation the cause of the exodus. The settlers brought fire and food crops (taro, yams, bananas, sugar cane) and some animals for eating— chickens, and, as we shall see presently, the little Polynesian rat. They probably took along dogs and pigs as well, but the latter two left no trace on Rapa Nui.³ Polynesians sailed to the Americas as well: the sweet potato, with its name, came from there, and it was a two-way cultural exchange; for the word for a stone ax in the language of the indigenous Mapuche people of Chile is most likely a loan from Old Rapanui.

The island is located at 27°9' S. and 109°25' W., with an area of 163.3 square km.; and the distance to Tahiti is 4190 km; to Chile, 3690 km. The island is triangular in shape, its extremities marked, as noted above, by three extinct volcanoes with crater lakes, thrusting nine thousand feet from the ocean floor and about a thousand feet from the present-day surface of the Pacific. Scores of smaller volcanoes dot the island's surface. Far from anywhere, Rapa Nui is the remotest and most isolated human settlement on earth. Tradition has it that the first men pulled up their canoes on the sandy beach at Anakena: they found a subtropical rainforest with thick stands of giant palms; but their tiny rats, either shipboard stowaways or, more probably, brought as a food staple, seem quickly to have decimated the trees. Replanting them all would have been a pointless exercise, just feeding more rats (the animal reproduces and multiplies at a phenomenal rate); so, as a recent study of the island's archaeology and palaeoculture suggests, the early Rapanui soon resorted instead to lithic mulch farming. This was perhaps the first great technological marvel of the island's stone age culture, for it meant

³ The island now has as many horses as people. These were introduced in the 19th century and have multiplied without impediment by predators. They are called in Rapanui *hoi*, perhaps a loan from English or derived from an exclamation; in Tahitian the periphrastic term for them is *pua'ahorofenna* "pig run land" (see Fischer 1993, p. 169), even more awkward than the ancient Mesopotamian *anšukurra*, "ass of the mountains".

moving about a billion small, porous volcanic pieces of rock to create little gardens across the now largely treeless island that could be protected from the constant winds. There were no rivers, making the islanders dependent for fresh water upon the large crater lakes, some underground streams, and rain caught in cisterns.

Though the island has a subtropical climate and it is possible to spend most of one's time outdoors and nearly naked, there are strong winds, winter can be chilly, and the people made bark cloth, as elsewhere in Polynesia, to protect themselves from the elements. They incised elaborate tattoos and body-paintings over themselves; and for ceremonial purposes they added headdresses of feathers. Chieftains wore a wooden breastplate, the *rei miro*, about which more presently. Headgear was of symbolic importance: the moai have cylindrical red stone crowns that were devilishly hard to elevate and safely install; and when the early European ships visited, the Rapanui relieved sailors and captains alike almost immediately of their hats. Food was what was brought or could be caught: yams, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugar cane, taro, chicken, and fish. There are no lagoons, no reefs to nurture very abundant fish stocks, and the growing scarcity of wood made the construction of seagoing canoes for deep-sea fishing uneconomical. At first there may have been some commerce with the rest of Polynesia; but the lesser Ice Age ca. AD 1500 cut off the Navel of the World from contact with the rest of Polynesia until the first European contact some two centuries later: the center of the universe was a lonely place to be. However the Rapanui, living in a decentralized society of clan-based areas with tiny villages practicing lithic farming, each clan with its sacred platform and serene ancestral statues gazing protectively inland, were loosely united under a head chief or king, were generally at peace, and had achieved a sustainable way of life and built a sophisticated material culture.

The spiritual culture of the island was similar to that of kindred Polynesian centers; and the language, though it has evolved in demonstrably long isolation, is still a recognizably close relative of Maori, Tahitian, Hawai'ian, and the other East Polynesian members of the Austronesian language family. Modern Rapanui contains numerous loans from Spanish and English; but there is scant evidence of early loan words from non-

Polynesian languages such as those of the ancient Americas, with the significant exception of *kumara*, “sweet potato”. Rapanui conceptions of society and self, of divinity and spirit, of death and the otherworld, are typical of other Polynesian cultures in most respects and also are parallel, if not to those of the three dominant Western religions, than to a far greater number of other belief systems, ancient and modern, on the planet. This parallelism (*not* relationship) will become evident in a comparison of Rapanui and old Armenian mythological cosmogonic texts. The moral system of Rapa Nui before Christianization in the late 19th century focused on the virtues of skill and power versus failure and impotence, rather than the abstract dualism of good and evil, much as one finds in other cultures based on external, social “shame” rather than internalized “guilt”— that of the Homeric Greeks furnishing perhaps the most familiar example for us. Invisible and spiritual power, called *mana*, inhered in objects, creatures, and persons. The population of the island was divided into clans called *mara*, marriage was most often within one’s clan though at a remove from the immediate family, and there were three divisions of society: the noble *ariki*; the commoner *urumanu*, and the expert craftsmen, *tuhunga*. The scribes of the texts of RR, for instance, were called *tuhunga tā*— experts in writing. There was also a class of slaves and outcasts. Social and geographical boundaries were strictly enforced and the force of *tapu* “taboo” was strong: this was a deeply stratified society, with an intricate and very elaborate system of genealogy and mythology. Feuds were common and violent; and defeated enemies were killed and eaten— cannibalism was a significant feature of the archaic culture of Rapa Nui. Late in pre-conquest history the *matato’a*, “warriors”, came to dominate the important Birdman cult, about which more will be said presently, and to challenge the authority of the hereditary nobility— a situation that led to instability and violence.⁴ As will be seen, a brilliant nobleman and scholar, Nga’ara, was able ingeniously, though only for a tragically short period, to establish a new kind of social harmony and cohesion.

⁴ Matato’a is now the name, *mutatis mutandis*, of Rapa Nui’s popular and successful (and anti-war!) rock band, which sings in the Rapanui language and celebrates the island’s traditions and ethnic identity, thereby presenting a counterweight to the powerful forces of linguistic and cultural assimilation while embracing the modern and global world.

The islanders are now all Christian, practicing a Catholicism enriched by a strong local substrate most visible in church art. But native texts still celebrate several gods, and considering the situation of Polynesia generally and of Rapa Nui in particular in the vastness of the Pacific⁵ it is scarcely surprising that Tangaroa, a being pre-eminently connected with the sea, was paramount, with his twin brother, the storm god Rongo. In later centuries a supreme creator-god, perhaps partly in imitation of the Christian cult it has been argued, came to the fore on Easter Island. The name of the latter, Makemake, whose meaning has been variously interpreted as either “the shining one” or “having an erect phallus”, was perhaps at first a cult epithet of Tangaroa, and it would seem the shapers of the long, metered lays of the island’s oral literature were interested particularly in the generative roles of divinities and creatures alike. The act of generation and its instrument, as we shall see, have provided a possible key, moreover, in the first steps towards decipherment of the glyphs — according, at least, to one school of decipherment.

As was noted above, with the onset of the Lesser Ice Age the islanders began to lose contact with the Polynesian home islands to the far west and true isolation set in. The islanders remembered their origins overseas and the legendary voyage of the founders, led by the mythical figure Hotu Matu’a. It is possible that a mounting feeling of loneliness and a desire to be able to cross the endless sea elevated the importance of the image and cult of the *tangata manu*, the Birdman (literally “man bird”). Once a year young men sponsored by the clans competed to descend from the precipitous sacred site of Orongo and paddle on reed mats through the turbulent, shark-infested sea to the tiny islet of Motu Nui, where they then waited. The first to find and safely bring back the delicate first egg of the sooty tern (*manutara*) won for a year for his clan patron the elevated and sacral status as Birdman of the island. The rite was not just a sort of native Olympics but (as a times in ancient Greece) a way of sublimating tensions and even armed conflicts between clan powers. The sacred ritual thus codified and cemented social stratification and harmony; and the rite combined socially sanctioned elements of

⁵ The Pacific Ocean is some 20,000 km wide — so great that some hold to the hypothesis that the Moon tore away from Terra here; and if Polynesia be taken as a single cultural area, it is formally the largest on the planet.

sacredness, danger, and virile prowess with key symbolic motifs of flight, sea travel, generation, and hybridization— the merging of categories of living species. When the Spaniards presented to the bemused Rapanui in 1770 a document ceding the island to them and asked them to sign it, the *ariki*, or chiefs, who had never seen writing before, gamely sketched a number of pseudo-alphabetic symbols in polite emulation of the Spaniards, a vulva symbol (underscoring the importance of the procreative pattern in the islanders' system of cosmology: there are hundreds of vulva petroglyphs where young women have undergone the initiation rite of clitoral extension), and a large outline of the Birdman petroglyph. (This is shown in the appendix.)

Islanders believed in a multitude of spirits, called *akuaku*: some of these brought elements of culture to the island and then departed to the Otherworld. One might again imagine the Sumerian Ea, Hellenized by Berossus to Oannes, the supernatural, submarine creature who taught writing and other skills of civilization to men at the head of the Persian Gulf and retired to his own realm at the end of every day. Rapanui believed, as did many other cultures, that a person had not one, but at least two souls. One died with him, but the other returned and was reincarnated, first as an insect or animal, then as a human being. One is reminded perhaps of the division in classical Zoroastrian culture between the *urvan* (Arm. l-w *uru*, now meaning “ghost”)— the personal soul that bears moral responsibility— and the protector-spirit called *fravashi* (Arm. l-w **hro(r)t*, attested in the ancient name of the last month of the year, Hrotic‘, cf. Avestan Fravašayō, *idem*); or of the multiple souls, some mortal and some transcendent, of ancient Egyptian thought; or of the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine with its intermediate stage, the *bardö*, in reincarnation. As for the location of the hereafter, it is either deep down or, more often, laterally very far away: when the first Rapanui of modern times ever to depart from the island returned on ships, their countrymen were terrified that these were ghosts from *hiva*, the otherworld, and were only gradually persuaded by relatives of the travelers that these were, indeed, the same mortal men they had known. Other shamanistic cultures, particularly in the Pacific region, locate the other world or worlds across the sea as well as up or down. The common belief of the three Abrahamic religions in a single human soul, and in a unitary and hierarchical universe in which female sexuality is somehow

problematic or evil, is not the only view of life— maybe even a minority opinion, still— on the planet.

The island is best known for the great stone figures of human ancestors called *moai*, of which about nine hundred are known, some finished and either whole or broken, many abandoned at their quarry, in construction: they are on average eleven meters tall and weigh about 100 tons. These increased in size over time: the first were much smaller; and the largest and most recent was never erected. All were quarried and carved on the inner and outer slopes of Rano Raraku (an extinct volcano with a crater lake) near mount Poike over about six centuries beginning roughly AD 1000, and finished statues were “walked”— tilted and angled by small teams of workers using ropes— along stone-paved roads to the stone seawall platforms, called *ahu*, where they were erected, singly or in rows, protectively facing inland over a court of small, rounded rocks. The statues were part of a cult of noble clan ancestors and served as a focus of ritual and worship. The dead were often interred in their vicinity. The islanders celebrated rites of passage for both sexes, as noted above, carving the petroglyph of the vulva, *rona komari*, to signify the ritual distending of a girl’s clitoris. (An individual stonecarver, it is important to note, often had a personal *rona*, or monogram— much as masons from Antiquity to recent times the world over.)⁶ There are about a thousand sites, with over four thousand petroglyphs, scattered across the island. The Rapanui still craft polished wooden figurines of delicate and exquisite workmanship: the most common is the spirit *moai kavakava*, an emaciated old man representing an *akuaku* spirit, possibly the god Makemake; the *tangata manu* “bird man”, of whom more presently; the *tangata moko* “lizard man” regarded as a protector of the home and capable of removing disease from the body; staffs and Janus-faced ritual oars; and the half-moon shaped pectoral plate of authority, the *rei miro*,⁷ being the principal traditional types. A number of *rei miro* bear rongorongo inscriptions; and one *tangata manu* has an incised inscription as well.⁸ Islanders wielded

⁶ Fischer 1993, p. 212.

⁷ The silhouette of this object now serves as the emblem on the local flag of the island.

⁸ One viewed at the American Museum of Natural History on 10 August 2012 in the Margaret Mead Hall the inscribed *tangata manu*, “man-bird”, i.e., Birdman, which is mislabeled as “tangata mana” (*mana* means supernatural power), and is displayed in a

the figures in ritual dances and chants; after evangelization, they also began to produce such Christian images as the Madonna and Child. Symbols carried over from petroglyphs, rock paintings, and carvings to tattooing, an art that was believed to have sacred origins: it was introduced by the two spirits Vi'e Moko and Vi'e Kena, who then returned to Ovakevake, the spirit world, in a waterspout (*ohirohiro*).⁹ As elsewhere in Polynesia, tattooing much of the surface of the body was very common. When the time came to create a system of writing, the Rapanui thus already possessed an extensive and sophisticated iconographic and symbolic corpus of petroglyphs and paintings, statuary and tattoo, the range of media an indication of its versatility, that required only ingenious elaboration into a true script.¹⁰ As all the symbols on which the inventor(s) of RR were to draw were already charged with mana, the hieroglyphic writing system was insured *ab initio* a sacral status as well.

2. GENOCIDE

Older reconstructions of the history of the island are often based upon ill-founded conjecture and seem to project the vices and misfortunes of the European and American past and present upon the Rapanui themselves and to cast the colonization of the island in a favorable light, as though the conquest were a kind of redemption from barbarism. Such imposition upon a people of an ignorant or malign misrepresentation of their own past can do incalculable damage. We are presently to consider parallels to the Armenian

glass cabinet in such a way and under such poor light as to make the unique inscription nearly invisible. Though the museum maintains the order and dignity of a third world railway station — it is filled to bursting with screaming, careening, uncontrolled and undisciplined hordes of children — one was able to view the rare Birdman in peace since nobody else was in the least interested in it. Nearby, however, crowds of tourists posed for photographs before the museum's much-advertised but unlabeled, *plaster-cast* of a moai!

⁹ Fischer 1993, p. 212.

¹⁰ This is a very general survey of the historical background and ecological situation, intended obviously for the reader who is not a specialist in Polynesia. The principal studies consulted are Fischer 2005 (especially on history) and Hunt and Lipo 2011 (who provide an important corrective to prevailing misconceptions about the island's history). One should also consult Routledge 1919 and Métraux 1940 — still the best monographs on Rapa Nui.

record; so one might note a significant correspondence here. The falsification of history — the political and academic machinery of denial of the Armenian Genocide — has intensified the anger and misery of an already traumatized people. It has done material harm to their country too; for a world dulled by “competing narratives” rather than quickened by moral responsibility has acquiesced in the blockade by Turkey and its Azeri henchmen of the Armenian Republic and the deleterious consequences that have flowed from it.

The Norwegian scholar Thor Heyerdahl, through whose writings most of us came to know of the island in the first place, was able to sail the *Kon Tiki*, his boat constructed of bundles of reeds from Peru, from the coast of South America to Easter Island. Having proven this could be done, he asserted that there had been a secondary South American settlement of the island. This theory might well have been subliminally patterned upon the fantasies of light-skinned, culturally and technologically superior “Aryans” invading and ruling more primitive (and, inevitably, darker) people in India and elsewhere. He then presented a series of comparisons of the island’s art and stonework to that of the Incas, deduced that several finely-worked seawalls of *ahus* most likely belong to the same culture that produced the architects of Machu Picchu, and concluded that the artistic geniuses who designed the moai, which have elongated ears, were light-skinned descendants of South American migrants, the “Long Ears” of island lore. Their ancestors, in turn, had come from the Old World still earlier. To account for the Polynesian character of the island’s culture as we know it, he further hypothesized that darker-skinned Polynesian inhabitants, the so-called “Short Ears”, obligingly or sullenly labored for the lordly Long Ears, whose edifice complex led to the devastation of the palm forests since the builders employed the trunks as rollers to get the moai from the quarry at Rano Raraku to their *ahu*-platforms. Once the tragically hubristic but nobly creative Long Ears had created their immortal monuments at the price of ecological catastrophe, the enslaved, primitive, despised, savage Short Ears revolted and the tragedy reached its denouement in a war of mutually assured destruction in which the moai were toppled, the combatants set fire to everything else that could burn, and the enervated, starving survivors could only sit and wait for the first European ships to arrive.

The foregoing picture of the island's history is largely fantasy, yet it survived till quite recently as the dominant narrative, not because European scholars were fools but because like many fantasies it was subliminally useful, even flattering, to those who maintained it. It is not just, as Steven Roger Fischer put it, an "insulting declaration that the Rapanui were not the authors of their own ancient culture,"¹¹ but an assertion that the islanders of the post-classical period were unworthy custodians of that culture, degenerated and violent epigones who brought about their own destruction and that of their island. In the warped perspective of this narrative the advent of the Europeans and of Christianity in particular was to the benefit of the Rapanui. It is much more likely the case that the Rapanui were a single population descended from Polynesians who had sailed there from the west around the middle of the first Christian millennium. After the rats originally brought as food escaped to gnaw away and decimate the primordial palm forest, the Rapanui seem, far from descending into ecological catastrophe, to have developed, as we have noted above, a fairly stable and sustainable lithic farming system well suited to their decentralized pattern of small homesteads in clan units loosely united under a king believed to be of divine descent. There were, thus, both local and island-wide religious rites to anchor oneself to family ancestors and to create and celebrate ties with others. The clans built their separate ahus and most erected moai on them: these were not a ruinous and pointless extravagance but an aesthetic practice that gave the people an important basis for social cohesion and a rich spiritual culture. The prototypes of the moai can be found to the west in Polynesia and the Rapanui merely refined, albeit to an astonishing degree, an existing art brought from their ancestral home. The moai were probably maneuvered over stone roads to their sites from the quarry at Rano Raraku by small teams of workmen "walking" them in a sort of zigzag movement with ropes: precious felled palm trunks were not, it would seem, wasted as rollers and the image of long-eared overseers commanding huge gangs of dissatisfied short-eared slaves corresponds more to romantic conceptions, fuelled by Hollywood, of Moses' people under Pharaoh than to Pacific realities. Nor was there an internecine war on an apocalyptic scale preceding the arrival of the Europeans, who saw (and duly depicted) all

¹¹ Fischer 2005, p. 188.

the moai standing when they first came to Rapa Nui. But, tellingly, the European visits did spark both clan feuding and an existential crisis of confidence in the traditional system of belief in the mana of moai and other foci of the sacred— as we shall see in greater detail presently.

What followed after first contact we know only too well, though, for it belongs, not to diffusionist fantasies tinged by narcissistic racism, nor to the misreading of archaeological data, but to the written historical record. On Easter Sunday of the year of grace 1722 Roggeveen named the island after a holiday none of its people had ever heard of, celebrated by a religion they did not practice: the Rapanui happily swam up and effusively welcomed the newcomers, whilst rather oddly taking special care to relieve them of their hats. The Dutch produced their awesome fire-sticks shot a dozen of them dead in an unfortunate misunderstanding about property, terrifying the Rapanui but apparently not irretrievably alienating them. Then Roggeveen and his compatriots sailed away, never to return. The first real taste of Christianity— and the second, of the terrifying foreign fire-sticks— came with the Spaniards, who landed in November 1770, erected three Crosses on three matching hillocks, marched around in splendid uniforms, and fired a 21-gun salute. They named the island this time after their king, San Carlos, and tricked the natives, who were apparently impressed by and delighted with the show and with the Spaniards' gifts (more hats!) into signing over the island to them. The chiefs, bemused but game, sketched a top-to-bottom, left-to-right slanting line of several symbols including a vulva, and put a large birdman glyph to the right.¹² Then the Spaniards sailed away and never returned. Captain Cook was the next customer, four years later: the Rapanui helped themselves to some more hats and made love to the pleased sailors, for whom sex was something of a taboo because of their religion, of which the Rapanui were still innocent. Cook's explorers stayed only a day since there was little in the way of food or fresh drinking water to be had for trade.

Between 1722 and 1862 there were a number of sporadic visits to the island; but the Europeans did not stay. In the latter year matters took a horrible turn for the worse:

¹² See Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1965, fig. 81 [p. 417].

Peru, desperate for manpower in its economic boom, kidnapped and enslaved Polynesian islanders, including most of the Rapanui, to harvest guano under lethal conditions. Christian missionaries tried to save some islanders by removing them to Tahiti and elsewhere; and the French government, probably motivated as much by a dispute with Peru over the latter's support for an insurrection in Mexico as by the human plight of the Rapanui, agitated for the release of the "indentured" workers. But most of these were already dead by the time the Peruvians relented; and the very few who returned brought smallpox and tuberculosis, which decimated an isolated people lacking any immunity. By the 1870s the population had plunged to 111 souls, after wave after wave of pandemics. Adventurous French and English entrepreneurs then converted the entire island into a huge sheep ranch, the surviving native people ruled by sheer terror, subject to increasingly vicious violations of their property and person. They were ultimately driven by main force from the hundreds of their tiny crofts into a single village, Hanga Roa ("Great Bay", so named for the nearby coast where most visiting ships moored and close to the fertile plain of Mataverí), to which they were confined behind a stone fence modeled on a Scottish sheepfold and kept under curfew as inmates of a ghetto or concentration camp. In 1888 Chile, a latecomer to Pacific empire, was encouraged by its ally Great Britain hurriedly to draw up a bill of annexation (according to the Spanish text) or protection and friendship (as the parallel text in Rapanui written in Latin script puts it). It is important to note that there were now Rapanui who could read their spoken language in the Latin alphabet, even if the document was a lie.

Till but a few decades ago the Rapanui were entirely without the legal and human rights of Chilean citizens on their island, and also were not allowed to leave it. The population hovered at about 400 by the 1930s and has since risen to ca. 4000, though many of the present-day residents are Chileans who have settled on the island and only a quarter to a third of the population have an active command of the Rapanui language. Mataverí is now an airport, next door to Hanga Roa, and with a runway long enough to accommodate a space shuttle. The hotels of the village welcome an exponentially (and dangerously) increasing horde of tourists, but the Rapanui people enjoy civil rights as citizens of a democratic Chile and have an articulate community structure striving for

political and cultural autonomy within the country. And the language may survive globalization, thanks to a revival of ethnic and cultural identity and pride. The Chilean government has made large parts of the island a protected national park and imposes severe fines on tourists who touch the antiquities; so these, too, may survive. After the terrible tribulations of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Rapanui live. Their beautiful script did not survive the genocide; but, as we shall see, it probably contributed to their survival.

3. RONGORONGO.

As we have seen, the ancient culture of Rapanui before contact with Europeans had a complex system of petroglyphs: both iconographical symbols and masons' marks. They employed these and other symbols in tattooing and in painting; and when the Spaniards came they were capable of inscribing a number on paper. The RR texts, on some twenty-five surviving boards (*kohau*) and other wooden objects (a pectoral, a Birdman figurine), are all that remains of hundreds and hundreds. The *kohau rongorongo* ranged from small pieces of wood to huge planks six feet long, and were stored in the houses of experts in writing, to be used to teach or taken out for festivals.¹³ Some were hidden by various clan-members in the caves used to conceal treasure, of which there were and are a great many in the porous volcanic rock of the island. They constitute the only indigenous Polynesian writing system known. After the eclipse of the epigraphic craft on wood, and the loss of systematized knowledge of RR, islanders remembering the script in part copied glyphs in part, in books that were hidden and shown to Europeans only in the 1960s. Till the mid-20th century the two great undeciphered scripts of America and Oceania— Maya and Rongorongo— were regarded dismissively by Western scholars as primitive systems of pictographs without the full communicative function of a true script. The Soviet scholar Yuri Knorozov, who also worked on and encouraged the study

¹³ McCall 1981, p. 44, suggests that the *kohau* RR, which are all incised, were touched rather than seen, in the dark buildings where priests studied— much as blind people employ Braille. (He also asserts that RR was an *aide de memoire* rather a true writing system.) This suggestion should be rejected, since Rapanui recalled that priests brought RR boards annually to outdoor celebrations at Anakena and read them.

of RR, deciphered Maya after World War II. Though scholars have made competing claims in recent years, RR has so far resisted, it would seem, convincing and complete decipherment.

Eugène Eyraud was the first outsider to be shown RR boards, in 1864— that is, two years after the beginning of the Rapanui Genocide. He reported that there were hundreds. (One of the surviving RR boards is shown in the appendix.) The last king of the island, Rokokoro he Tau, and the last Birdman, Rukunga, died in 1866. Vike of the Hau Moana clan was the last *tuhunga tā* to die on the island— of smallpox.¹⁴ Within a few years there were hardly any RR boards, or people who knew how to read them, to be found. The islanders had believed every RR glyph possessed the same mana as a *rona*, a petroglyph; perhaps the catastrophe that had overcome them suggested that supernatural power had been lost. (Some large boards were used as timber for boats.) Alternatively, conversion to Catholicism convinced Rapanui that the mana of RR was real, but heathen and therefore evil: though the monks themselves had a scholarly interest in RR, the very teachings they promulgated could easily have led their credulous proselytes to destroy the very monuments the scholarly priests wished to study. Or, indeed, during inter-clan feuding Rapanui destroyed and burnt each other's *kohau* RR. But the subsequent production of manuscripts, which were carefully preserved and hidden from alien eyes would strongly suggest that reverence for the writing system was not wholly lost. The elderly leper Tomenika (Rapanui for “Domingo”), who wrote glyphs on paper and was interviewed by Mrs. Routledge, was probably the last Rapanui to have preserved knowledge of the script, though.¹⁵ Yet another possibility (and none of these entirely excludes the others) is that the perpetually competitive clans of the island, driven by multiple and severe social and natural traumas to feuding, destroyed each other's *kohau* RR. The sudden and radical diminution of the glyph-bearing boards has, thus, remained without satisfactory explanation— most likely all the above factors came into play. By way of comparison and analogy, one might observe the fate of the great stone figures, the *moai*. When Roggeveen came in 1722, all the statues his party saw stood upright on their

¹⁴ Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1965, p. 326.

¹⁵ Routledge 1919, pp. 250-253.

ahu-platforms; but by the time of Captain Cook's visit in 1774, most had been toppled facing forward.¹⁶ The appearance of the Europeans perhaps persuaded the Rapanui that the images of their ancestors had lost their mana; or the new situation intensified feuding between clans, who vengefully toppled each other's moai. Yet just as with the hieroglyphic script, texts in which were recopied on a new medium even after the demise of the *kohau* RR and the loss of their key, the subsequent situation of the moai is not without ambiguity: islanders continued to bury their dead in the vicinity of the moai, often right underneath the fallen monoliths. This indicates many continued resolutely to regard the sites and the now prostrate statues as sacred.

After Eyraud's "discovery" news of the RR "hieroglyphics" spread, and travelers to the island searched for RR boards: the Smithsonian, the Santiago museum, and other centers of research acquired the rare pieces of finely polished wood with row upon row of enigmatic characters. The great Russian ethnographer Nikolai Nikolayevich Miklukho-Maklai, for instance, visited Rapa Nui and other islands on the ship *Vityaz'* in 1871: he brought two RR boards to St. Petersburg, where they were deposited in the *Kunstkamera* of Peter the Great, which became part of the institute and museum of ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1925 A. Piotrovsky compiled and published the first proper catalogue of the glyphs at Leningrad. In 1940 three teenagers saw the boards on a school trip and formed a club, "Descendants of Maklai": the museum's director, Prof. D.A. Ol'derogge, was so impressed with the young Boris Kudryavtsev's researches in particular that he proposed the youth publish a monograph. But the latter died on the front defending the Soviet Union from the Nazi invader; and two years after the War Ol'derogge sadly published Kudryavtsev's posthumous papers. Yuri Knorozov, another brilliant young scholar of the institute, devoted his attention first to Maya, which he deciphered correctly in the late 40s. Though some powerful Western academics, who seem to have had a vested interest in keeping down the Maya heritage as illiterate and "primitive", initially dismissed this momentous discovery as Communist propaganda, a young Harvard researcher named Michael Coe bucked the establishment and Knorozov's momentous achievement was soon universally accepted. Knorozov, Nikolai Butinov, and

¹⁶ Routledge 1919, p. 204.

Irina Fedorova then worked on RR; the latter, a scholar of Polynesian linguistics, subsequently pursued her studies independently of Knorozov, and published in Russian a monograph containing what she claimed was a full decipherment, in 2001.

Fedorova, now deceased, came to the conclusion that the texts were all agricultural songs of magical purpose. She also accepted Knorozov's paradigm that hieroglyphic systems historically arise at the point of the establishment of state structures (Rus. *gosudarstvennost'*), as was the case in China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Consequently she fixed the terminus for the invention of RR at the late 16th or early 17th century — the end of the high classical period of the island's culture — believing it to have come about at the time of the apex of moai construction. But another linguist and specialist in decipherment, Steven Roger Fischer, had published in 1997 at Oxford his own massive tome in which he came up with very different conclusions. Both scholars agree RR is a hieroglyphic script like Egyptian, Chinese or Maya; that it was invented on the island by the ancestors of its present inhabitants; that its inventors based its characters on the earlier petroglyphs found in large numbers everywhere on Rapa Nui; and that it is to be read in Old Rapanui. But that is where their agreement ends.

All existing RR boards are of recent date and Fischer proposes that RR, which is written left to right in parallel boustrophedon lines, was based upon the Spanish writing the islanders saw and therefore was invented soon after 1770. The rationale for this dating is two-fold: the islanders believed the Spaniards, with their great ships of precious wood, their fire sticks, and their armor of a strange, hard, shiny material (metal) possessed through writing as well a superior *mana* that the Rapanui might acquire through emulation. The sudden appearance of these uncanny, powerful aliens presented also a radical challenge to the traditional Rapanui way of life. And all the existing RR artifacts are of relatively recent date. The Rapanui, then, created RR in emulation of the mysteriously powerful art of the powerful aliens. It was a way of preserving key oral texts: cosmologies, genealogies, erotic songs — and endowing them with new prestige, at a time when the traditional Rapanui world view had been shaken to its foundations. Fedorova asserts, rather, that because of the perishable nature of wood as a medium the

existing RR boards are copies of older ones. Quite aside from the inherent weakness of the *argumentum ex silentio*, one might then ask why there is no evidence of archaic **epigraphy** from the period when she supposes RR to have been invented. From the period following the invention of RR one encounters, for instance, two RR glyphs for the vulva, *komari*, incised into a petroglyph of the *tangata manu* on the smaller of the two boulders at the Harvard Peabody Museum.¹⁷ This is not a unique example, only one the writer has himself seen first-hand. And the adaptation of RR to writing on paper by the elderly islander Tomenika in the first decade of the 20th century, further demonstrates the versatility of the Rapanui: had RR existed in the classical period, one might expect to see it on stone (as indeed one does in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and in Mesoamerica). There is no *a priori* reason it should have been confined to wood, even though wood was a uniquely precious material on the nearly treeless island. Indeed in 1958 Thomas Barthel recorded the testimony of two informants to the effect that the aforementioned Tomenika claimed the mythical ancestor of the Rapanui, Hotu Matu'a, had brought "RR on paper" (using for the latter the Tahitian word *marau* "book") at the first settlement of the island. When the paper disintegrated the islanders wrote on *toro maika* "banana stem". This seems to be more than a retro-fitting of tradition to sanction new usage; for when RR was written on boards, students of the schools really did their exercises on *rito maika* "banana leaves". And the great chief and scribal teacher Nga'ara himself (about whom more presently) sketched the glyphs in *ngarahu* "soot" before engraving them.¹⁸

Fischer further accepts the testimony of islanders who had heard priests recite from the RR boards, concerning their content. Although unlike Fedorova he does not produce a continuous reading of any text and his claim to have deciphered the script seems an immodest exaggeration, he does note a recurrent pattern of glyphs, which he renders by the formula X1 Y Z, according to which the being (X) copulates (1) with (Y) and (Z) is generated. Generation is taken for granted in this shorthand because of the preceding copulation sign, and no glyph for it is written. And this pattern corresponds to the repetitive shape and style of an important cosmological hymn that the islanders said

¹⁷ See Horley and Lee 2012.

¹⁸ Fischer 1993, p. 182.

the priests who read the RR indeed chanted. It is a commonplace in folklore that a repetitive pattern, and the repetition of words, is an aid to memory, as is the verse form as opposed to prose.

Scholars have egos, and a sort of Cold War mentality informs the debate. Fedorova dismisses Fischer's hypothesis brusquely, with an aggrieved and defensive Soviet dogmatism as methodologically suspect as Fischer's sunny and assertive American triumphalism (his eminently readable autobiography bears the rather swashbuckling title, *Glyph Breaker*). She does not subject Fischer's painstakingly detailed argument to a sustained or systematic critique in her own book, most of which is a review of Rapa Nui history and ethnography. Only a few pages of the large tome are devoted to a sketchy explanation of her method, and no justification for its arbitrariness is offered. Fedorova is able to produce an entire decipherment only by assuming the agricultural content of the texts *in advance* and working on that assumption in interpreting the glyphs: for instance, glyphs of all different sorts are assumed to be rebuses for a number of different terms for varieties of the yam; and nearly all the characters taken to represent verbs are likewise assumed to represent actions associated with digging, planting and harvesting. There are no formulae in her reading that are identifiably magical.

The importance of agriculture in particular, and of fertility in general, to a stone-age culture in a small, isolated, and challenging environment, cannot be overemphasized; and the student of ancient Greece is aware of the centrality of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, for instance, to the early literary corpus— there is even a reference to it in the Greek graffiti of Armawir, perhaps of the 2nd century BC, in Armenia.¹⁹ It would also be a methodological error to suppose that because the *kohau* RR are impressive in appearance and exquisite in execution, their textual content must conform to an outsider's preconception of the sublime. The belief that the Egyptian hieroglyphs must be of elevated mystical content was long an obstacle to their decipherment; and in more recent times Ilya Gershevitch showed that the alphabetic inscription at Baghlan, Afghanistan, in

¹⁹ Russell 1987, pp. 54-55.

Bactrian—a Middle Iranian language far less enigmatic than RR— was not the eloquent hymn to the Zoroastrian divinity Mithra of which the German savant Helmut Humbach produced an erudite reading, but just the record of the repair of a well.²⁰

However Fedorova's arbitrary supposition of a single theme to the exclusion of all others goes against the testimony of witnesses to readings of the RR documents, and requires that the most disparate glyphs be forced into a Procrustean bed, or rather, a garden row of yams. Rather uncharitably, she downplays the reliability important testimony of 1886 of Daniel Ure Va'e Iko because he was slightly tipsy when he recited the content of a RR board to attentive American sailors. Daniel's recitation, though, contains the formula upon which Fischer relied. The evidence of the MSS produced subsequently, which we shall examine, suggests the Rapanui wanted to set down in writing much more than magically-charged lists of edible plants: they were interested in cosmology, in weather, in genealogy as well. Their traditional corpus of knowledge was meant to order their entire world— and to restore a sense of that order when it was shaken to its foundations. One also wonders how likely it was that texts of drastically varying length, from the few characters on the wooden *tangata manu* at the Museum of Natural History in New York to the giant planks out of which disillusioned islanders built boats, were all and only yam-growing charms. If RR was created in response to a profound cultural trauma, as an adaptation to a rapidly changing world, than the content of the texts might be more of an emergency salvage operation of the culture as a whole than a calm encyclopedia of agriculture. This forces one to approach her findings with caution.

Fedorova's *a priori* application to the situation on Rapa Nui of Knorozov's theory about the rise of hieroglyphic systems in nascent states also seems to lack the necessary historical nuance by which one would distinguish a massive bureaucratic entity in a stable ecological system from a small, precarious, endangered culture; and this, too, calls her dating of the script into question. The little island, without so much as a perennial

²⁰ See Gershevitch 1985, pp. 55-82 on Bactria; on Champollion's misguided predecessors see Robinson 2012, pp. 15-27.

stream, can scarcely be compared to the great hydraulic civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. If the testimonies of native and European eyewitnesses are to be believed, the island before the catastrophe of the 1860s had a vast library of *kohau* RR. Fedorova might have adduced this in support of her opinion that the script was by then hundreds of years old— had it been invented less than a century earlier, how could so many written monuments have been assembled so quickly? One might answer this (admittedly unasked) question with two considerations: first, prodigious cultural production was a hallmark of Rapanui civilization. Less isolated kindred Polynesian cultures produced a few small stone statues: rather than lapsing in isolation on their little island into desultory lassitude, the people of Easter Island carved the moai. Second, the school of Maštoc‘ produced a huge canon of translated and original texts in under a century; and we shall presently note more interesting parallels between the Pacific island and the Armenian *leṛnakłzi*, the “mountain-isle” to show that writing has been invented, not only at the rude dawn of the nascence of a great state, but in the crepuscular last rays of the collapse of a small one. The Armenian paradigm will be seen to fit Rapanui better than the Fertile Crescent one.

Rongorongo script is now generally accepted by serious researchers as a hieroglyphic system containing names with their morphemes, i.e., a picture pronounced with the corresponding word for it; homographs, that is, pictures of objects whose name is a homonym of another word that cannot be represented visually, rather like a rebus; and determinatives, i.e., symbols representing the category to which the symbols belong. Thus, Fischer reads as a single phrase from a known cosmological hymn the signs designated in Barthel’s standard list as 631, 700, and 8, in the long inscription on the “Santiago staff”. The first is a composite showing a bird with a man’s hand and a phallus. As the words for “hand” and “all” in Rapanui are homonyms, pronounced *mau*; and the phallus (glyph no. 76 alone) is understood to mean “copulate(d)”, the first glyph reads *Te manu mau ki ‘ai ki roto ki*, “All the birds copulated with”, followed by *ika* “fish”; the phrase *ka pū* “there was born” is understood since the hymn is made of repetitive formulas; and the final glyph is simply *te ra’ā*, “the Sun”. (The phrase in glyphs is written out in the appendix.) This follows the X1 Y Z formulaic pattern of the

cosmological hymn Daniel Ure Va'e Iko said was on a *kohau* RR and recited for a group of American sailors in 1886. But for Fedorova the fish-shaped sign *ika* does not represent a fish at all but is a rebus for the identical-sounding name for a variety of yam. So she argues that since Fischer cannot by his method produce the reading of an entire tablet, while she can, his reading of this formula, even though it is one found repeated in several inscriptions, is misguided wishful thinking. It is plain, I think, that Fischer's findings should not be dismissed summarily; but neither should Fedorova's— and full decipherment may ultimately rest on the foundations laid by these two serious scholars, themselves building of course on the labors of their great predecessors.

5. NGA'ARA.

Following the appearance of the Europeans, then, Rapanui society evidently underwent severe internal stress: the destruction of the moai is the most obvious outward sign. (One may dismiss Fedorova's assertion that the statues collapsed in earthquakes. All the evidence points to intentional destruction.) But RR production and study flourished under the quarter-century reign of the island's most famous scholar-chief, the revered Nga'ara, who brilliantly combined his temporal power with authority as a *tahunga tā*, an expert on writing, thereby curbing the destructive power of the *matato'a* warriors and providing a new ground of spiritual and cultural harmony and continuity for the island. Nga'ara not only established the RR festival at Anakena as the primary rite on Rapa Nui; he also supervised all the RR schools on the island, which he regularly visited and inspected, rewarding good teachers with the gift of a *kohau* RR from his huge library. The pupils practiced glyphs, as noted above, on banana leaves. For feats of memorization they employed *kaikai*— rhythmic songs sung to the manipulation of cat's cradle patterns. His was not an easy tenure: he suffered imprisonment and humiliation by enemies, but was vindicated as the greatest leader of the Rapanui of historical times, and not because of his prowess but because of his genius and patronage of learning.

Nga'ara died in 1859, just three years before the slave raids and pandemics began; his sons perished in Peruvian captivity. If RR was invented after the Rapanui first in 1770

encountered the writing of the Spaniards, then Nga'ara was, if not its creator, then certainly its principal proponent for most of the period of its existence as a living script, the statesman who presided over the massive project of the setting down in writing of the island's full corpus of oral literature in an astonishingly short time. Even though the sequelae of the Genocide of 1862 led to the loss of RR, Rapanui culture might have perished entirely, if not for the roly-poly *ariki mau* Nga'ara. For RR conferred sanctity on the versified and sung text, on knowledge itself, providing an impetus to the preservation of that knowledge even when RR was gone.

Yet in a way, the RR script Nga'ara had cultivated enjoyed a shadowy, powerful afterlife, like a benevolent revenant spirit— or perhaps he had successfully instilled in the Rapanui a love of writing *per se* and, thus, the foundation of an indigenous intellectual life. For during a very brief respite from foreign harassment and depredation, in the years 1892-96, Tomenika and a handful of others compiled and wrote down on paper traditional stories including mythological texts on the supreme god Makemake and the creation of the world; a version of the Hotu Matu'a cycle (a chronicle of the discovery of Rapa Nui); genealogical lists of the kings who followed him; episodes of the history of the island since the slave raids; a list of aboriginal lunar months with their European equivalents; texts on weather and on agriculture; names for types of sweet potatoes; texts for religious feasts; chants recited during religious ceremonies; etc. These are in ledgers in Latinized Rapanui, along with painstaking handwritten copies of RR texts taken from photographs, and lists of glyphs with New Rapanui translation drawn, not from indigenous knowledge but from the dictionary of the European savant Bishop Jaussen of a few years earlier. One ledger, tellingly, contains also a brief quotation in Rapanui translation from the Book of Genesis— cosmology was a principal focus of interest and here one witnesses an attempt to harmonize island tradition with Catholic dogma. The manuscripts were carefully hidden and regarded as sacred treasure, with the same reverence that once had been accorded the *kohau rongorongo*.²¹ Though one cannot say for certain that the contents of the manuscripts reflect faithfully or exactly the contents of

²¹ See Fischer 2005, pp. 147-148; Heyerdahl 1975, pp. 96-101; and detailed reports with facsimiles in Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1965, Appendix B (pp. 391-411).

the *kohau* RR, they agree in general with the testimony of those who had heard recitations from the tablets as to the contents of the latter; and it is seen that the ideas of Fischer and Fedorova about these overlap. Some of the island's oral literature deals with human generation, the microcosmic aspect of cosmology: *He time te akoako*, for instance is a very ancient choral song of sexual jeering; one might compare it to the ancient Greek nuptial hymenaea (Sappho's "Raise high the roof beam, carpenters" to let in a bridegroom with a towering erection, gave its name to a novel by the American writer J.D. Salinger), or to the bawdy pre-Christian Armenian *ergk' c'c'oc' ew baruc'*, "songs of *phalluses and dances".²² And with that one turns now to these and other relics of another people and another past.

6. ST. MESROP MAŠTOC'.

The mountain-island Armenia was in the first centuries of the Christian era a vast patchwork of clan-based dynastic holdings separated from each other by mountain ridges, in deep valleys or on high plateaux, each with its patriarchal hierarchy, the local temples (*bagink'*) with their statues of ancestors and gods over which it exercised patronage, its complex web of alliances with other clans, and its hereditary prerogatives at the court of the Arsacid king, whose power depended upon the maintenance of those prerogatives and the balancing of relationships with the *naxarars*— the dynastic heads of the various clan-lands. The welter of overlapping designations in native Armenian and in terms loaned from Parthian (*hayrapet*, "patriarch", *nahapet*, "*idem*"; *t'agawor* "king", *ark'ay* "*idem*"; *azg* "clan", *tohm*, "*idem*"; etc.) attests to the great antiquity and slow, organic growth of these institutions; and to their successful melding with the similar social structures of Zoroastrian Iran, whose noble houses in the Parthian era intermarried with Armenians

²² Gen. pl. *c'c'oc'* could be from *c'oyc'* "performance, display"; but in the argot of the felt-pounders of Moks a man is a *c'ic'*, "tent peg", in what is presumably a metaphorical allusion to the phallus. The dances were often called *kak'awuc'*, "of partridges", and *kak'aw*, an Aramaic loan, is often used to mean a woman. Christian authors uniformly condemn the songs and dances as lewd; and the reference may be, thus, to celebrations at which men and women danced together, with all the implications therefrom.

and ruled the realm. It was a decentralized system much like that of Rapanui, internally fractious but durable.

In the early fourth century mass conversion of the nation to Christianity began, as the new faith achieved a critical mass of followers in the Near East. The Armenian Arsacids adopted Christianity as they wrestled to free themselves from the militantly parochial state structure and newly puritanical sacerdotal hierarchy set in place by the Sasanian Persian house that had usurped the throne from their clansmen in Iran. The pre-Christian religion of the Armenians was then suppressed; its temples, destroyed and churches built over their ruins. The Arsacids, particularly the larger-than-life king Aršak II and the brave commanders-in-chief Mušeł and Vasak of the Mamikonean clan, fought a long, hopeless war through the fourth century against the inexorable strength of the Sasanian Empire under its long-lived monarch Šābuhr II. A later chronicle of the period, the *Buzandaran* (perhaps “epic histories”, though it might simply identify as a Byzantine its mysterious author, P‘awstos, i.e., Faustus — not a common Armenian name), casts the narrative in the set form of a heroic epic in which the good are doomed but must fight on, so that even though they and their realm will perish, their true faith will survive. Such was the shape of the catastrophe as contemporaries perceived it; and in 387 the country was partitioned between Persia and Rome.

The Armenian Arsacid dynasty were to endure only till 429 in the larger, eastern part of Armenia, *Mec Hayk’*; and after them the country became a Sasanian province governed by a *marzpan*, “guardian of a marchland”. Maštoc’ (Mesrop is a later epithet of unknown meaning) was born in 362, a generation before the partition, in the village of Hac‘ekac’ in Tarawn, in the greater Armenian heartland, to a minor noble (*karčazat*) named Vardan, a name closely associated with the Mamikonean clan, to a branch of which, then, he perhaps belonged; and Maštoc’'s name may mean something like “good tidings”.²³ The young man traveled to the capital at Vařaršapat and served the Arsacid court as both a soldier and a secretary. He took holy orders, too; so in addition to his

²³ See Russell 1994 on the Armenian alphabet and Russell 1994(a) on the name of the Saint.

native Armenian and the Middle Persian required of a courtier he learned Greek and Syriac. These were the languages of the Church; for till then the only writing system Armenian seems to have possessed was a relatively rarely-used heterographic script of the same sort the various Iranian peoples had developed from the Imperial Aramaic employed by the Achaemenids. The Armenians were about to lose the remains of political sovereignty, and their cultural identity as well was quickly becoming eclipsed: they could either be assimilated into the Greek- and Syriac-speaking Christian churches and communities, or else abandon Christianity and revert to Zoroastrianism, but now risk being Persianized by the aggressive Sasanian régime.

Maštoc' and an associate, the patriarch Sahak Part'ew ("the Parthian"), saw the invention of an Armenian alphabet as a way to save the nation in this existential crisis. They enjoyed the patronage of king Vramšapuh, and the hagiographer Koriwn, a disciple of Maštoc' records that they experimented with an alphabet supplied by a priest named Daniel whose letters "were buried and resurrected". This was perhaps the old heterographic writing system, employed for a pre-Classical form of Armenian, whose letters were, as Maštoc' discovered after some experimentation, insufficient to represent all the consonantal sounds and the various diphthongs of Armenian. But after augmentation with letters derived probably in Manichaean Middle Persian and in Coptic, and divine revelation in dreams, in AD 406 Maštoc' created an Armenian alphabet, with the order of the letters following in general that of Greek (though it would seem he also employed a sort of Pythagorean numerical mysticism in the ordering of the full set of 36 characters to encode cosmological ideas).²⁴

qHe immediately formed a school and sent his disciples to collect and translate both the Bible a vast array of Greek, Syriac, and, probably, also Persian literature. This was done with extreme speed; and Armenia was in essential respects self-sufficient in scholarly resources in its own language within a century, equipped with technical vocabularies for theological and philosophical compositions as well as a durable literary style probably inherited from the sophisticated oral literature that preceded literacy (and, for most

²⁴ See "Maštoc' the Magician," appendix to Russell 2012(a).

Armenians for many centuries, persisted alongside it). Maštoc' also engaged the services of one Rūp'anos (i.e., Rufinus, perhaps a Roman) to design the uncial forms of the letters in such a way as to make them imposing in inscriptions and impressive in manuscripts. That is, they were to co-opt the propagandistic charisma— the *mana!*— of both Roman imperial epigraphy and the Greek codex. So the saint looked to the material around him to create a writing system that was still in many respects without precedent. He was a holy man but also a politician, an adept administrator, and a teacher. And he did all this at a moment of crisis. Had he failed, it is unlikely Armenia would have survived the tribulations of the campaign of the Sasanian Yazdegerd II two generations later, or the Arab conquest of the seventh century. The mountain-island was precariously to survive, though battered by the waters of a rising Islamic ocean.

Maštoc' invented the Armenian alphabet primarily for a sacral purpose— the translation of the Bible and of other Christian texts into Armenian— and deliberately endowed it with visible symbolic sanctity. He chose to make the final, 36th letter an aspirate *k'* in the form of the Greek Chi-Rho symbol of Christ, thereby giving literal visual shape to the declaration of Our Lord that He is the Alpha and the Omega— the first and the last. (The last letter for Jesus, a Jew and native speaker of Aramaic and Hebrew, would have been *tav*, perhaps not coincidentally cruciform in form!) One finds a contemporary parallel to this deliberate sanctification in the writing system of the Ho people of India, a group whose language is under threat of extinction: its inventor placed a character representing the Hindu sacred syllable Om at the beginning of his list of symbols. In the Ho case, according to Harrison, each letter reflects intimately the realia, way of life, and cosmology of the Ho, so one symbol resembles a child crying; another, a plow; another, a tree falling; yet another, a leaf cup for drinking home-brewed liquor. The resonance of the latter is particularly important: according to local myth that curiously reverses the fall of Adam and Eve, the now-elderly first human couple had lived long in Paradise without procreating, and an exasperated God taught them how to make liquor. They became tipsy, then aroused; and generated mankind.²⁵ Here the parallel to RR as well as to Armenian is instructive: just as the inventor(s) of RR used symbols to hand that

²⁵ Harrison 2010, pp. 198-200.

were of both everyday and mythological significance, so did the creator of the Ho script. The script of this small Indian people inspires and strengthens them, and is contributing to their cultural survival.

Although Maštoc's purpose was to anchor Christianity in Armenia and to secure for the Armenians national and cultural survival within the new context of the Christian faith even as the other paradigms of identity, whether social or spiritual, were faltering or disappearing, the alphabet was early employed also for the composition of original works. Much as the Rapanui sought through the recording on the *kohau* RR, as it seems, of genealogical and cosmological hymns to chart and affirm a stable mental map of their world, so the immensely learned Armenian *patmahayr* or "father of history", Movsēs Xorenac'i, devoted the first of the three books of his *Patmut'iwn Hayoc* ("History of the Armenians") to a *cnndabanut'iwn Hayoc Mecac* ("genealogy of Greater Armenia"), in which one finds the parables of the eponymous ancestor of the Armenians, Hayk bravely confronting the superior force of the Assyrian god Bel; of the Armenian king Ara the Beautiful scorning the grand hests of the Assyrian queen Semiramis; of the Armenian king Tigran fighting and defeating the deceitful Median tyrant Aždahak; and of Tork' Angeł, the ugly giant defending his home (a Polyphemus as viewed by his own people rather than through the lens of the Achaean colonial raiders!)²⁶ — the web of myths that shaped the Armenians' view of themselves and situated and gave meaning to their origins in primordial time. Although the work is also a monument of learned eloquence suffused with Neoplatonic moral concepts and citations and imitations of Classical authors such as Josephus and Eusebius, it is replete with native tradition that is recorded nowhere else. We should do it injustice to give it short shrift as a learned lucubration or an un-historical pastiche, or to regard the Genealogy as a mere imitation and expansion of the genealogical sections of Genesis or the mythography of Eusebius and Berossus. This would give unfairly short shrift to the crucial, native material, and would also be a failure to understand the work and its intention as a whole.

²⁶ Russell 1996-7.

This is not the place to enter into the vexed question of the formal date of composition of this seminal book of the Armenian tradition: it is certainly plausible to date it to the late 5th century, and there are strong grounds for doing so. But then there must have been significant interpolations. It is equally certain— and more important, to our present purpose— that much of the legendary and mythological material in it goes back to well before the Christian era and endured in oral form down to the eighth century and beyond. (One recalls that the massive Epic of Sasun, with its accurate and detailed evocations of the pre-Christian cult of the apocalyptic Iranian divinity, Mithra, and other trappings of hoary antiquity, was set down in writing by ethnographers listening to oral reciters, beginning only in the early 1870s.) The preservation of this material in writing suggests, not the detached erudition of an armchair antiquarian, but the lively concern of a scholar laboring for the survival of his people, whom he eloquently praises as small in number yet not deficient in deeds of greatness meriting record. He insists that he has listened to the recitations of the *gusans*—the bards— and has faithfully recorded their lays. Xorenac'i's princely Bagratid patron Smbat and his family and retainers would have read (or heard) the book much as a Rapanui chief and his clansmen might have listened to the recitation of a genealogical *kohau* RR on the shore at Anakena where, legend had it, the primordial ancestor and visionary patriarch of the people, Hotu Matu'a, landed at the Navel of the World. The genealogy is as much orientation in space and time, in history and society, as the destruction of one's culture is *dis*-orientation.

The first book of Xorenac'i's *History* includes the famous pre-Christian song of the birth of the god Vahagn, which is also a cosmological poem, the oldest text preserved in Armenian and arguably one of the most intricate, for its size, in any Indo-European language. Of its 42 words, 26 are repeated (that is, well over half) and there is obvious formulaic repetition of the strophes— tell-tale evidence of orality akin to the structure of the hymns Fischer claims to have found in RR.

Erknēr erkin, erknēr erkir,

Erknēr ew covn cirani.

Erkn i covun unēr

Ew zkarmrikn etegnik:

End etegan p'ot cux elanēr,
End etegan p'ot boc' elanēr,
Ew i boc' oyn vazēr
Xarteaš patanekik.
Na hur her unēr,
Boc' unēr mawrus,
Ew ač'kunk'n ēin aregakunk'.

“Heaven was in labor, earth was in labor,
 Labored too the *golden²⁷ sea.
 The labor in the sea had
 Also the little red reed.
 Along the reed's shaft smoke rose;
 Along the reed's shaft flame rose—
 And out of the flame ran
 A blond little youth.
 He fire hair did have,
 Flame had he a beard,

²⁷ Arm. *cirani* is the standing alliterative epithet of *cov*; and in the 5th-cent. translation of the Bible and elsewhere it translates Greek *porphyron*, “purple”. Homer's sea was wine-dark. Kocharov 2009 in the most thorough study of this poetic figure to date reviews early attempts to etymologize the word as a loan from Old Iranian **zaranya*- “golden”. He notes that the difficulty of deriving Armenian initial *ts*- from the Iranian makes these suggestions, if not impossible, then at least inconclusive. But the poetic use and context of the word is still noteworthy for comparison with Arm. *cirani cov*: in the Avesta it forms an alliterative figure as an epithet of *zrayah*- “sea”. Presumably Arm. *ciran*, “apricot”, received its name because it was the “golden”, i.e., “precious” fruit (my pupil Christian Millian at Harvard has made the essential connection here of the fruit to its great value in neighboring cultures); and I would suggest that the meaning of *cirani* as “purple” would be secondary, following the Armenians' first encounters with the precious Mediterranean dye. That would have taken place around or before the time that the song of Vahagn, with its significant percentage of Middle Iranian loans, was recited in the form in which Xorenac'i heard it, so “purple sea” certainly is a possible understanding. However I would venture here that the color “golden” would be better consonant with the substantial register of closely similar colors— red, fiery, flaming, blond, sun(like)— in the poem, so one tentatively suggests an “archaic” reading of the epithet.

And his little eyes were little suns.’’²⁸

Xorenac‘i could not have preserved the poem, were it not for the script of Maštoc‘; and that script enables us to appreciate all the lexical and phonetic details of the poem exactly as the Father of History heard a minstrel recite it to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. It describes how out of the birth pangs of heaven, earth, and the sea a fiery human emerged from a reed. This is an archaic cosmological theme. But let us suppose for a moment that we did not have the Armenian alphabet, or that a script for the language had been invented in some other way, or using other principles, and see what we might have had to work with instead.

The cliffs, boulders, and grassy slopes of the Armenian plateau abound in petroglyphs engraved and painted by members of early and unnamed human societies. They depict armed men and running animals, flying or perching birds and arcane, abstract symbols.²⁹ And later cultures, also silent to the historical record, left along river banks the great, prehistoric cigar-shaped smoothed *višap* (“dragon”) stones with bas-reliefs of sea monsters and oxen. The Urartians, as the Assyrians called them (and hence Ararat; they called themselves Biaina, from which comes Armenian Van; or Nairi), had hieroglyphics but later left cuneiform inscriptions on these *višap*-stones and on boundary markers, commemorative steles, and on clay tablets. Some of the ancient steles were re-used in turn by Armenians as *xač‘k‘ars* (“Cross-stones”). And a very few of the mediaeval *xač‘k‘ars* have engraved upon them encoded texts whose cryptograms of lines and dots are based, in all likelihood, upon those cuneiform wedge-shapes Armenians saw. So there were numerous symbols and inscriptions in Armenia that the alert and observant Maštoc‘ probably knew of; yet he opted for a fully phonetic alphabet of letters separated from each other, easy to read, and written like Latin and Greek from left to right, rather

²⁸ Xorenac‘i 1913, pp. 85-86. The standard translation and commentary is that of Thomson 1978. See Russell 1989 and 2012 for analysis of the poetics and mythology of the hymn; and Russell 1987, Ch. 6, on the cult of Vahagn generally.

²⁹ Petrosyan 2005 should be employed only for its helpful sketches of petroglyphs: the author’s analytical essay, which advances the idea that the presence of the swastika symbol in these prehistoric glyphs proves Armenian origins in a putative “Aryan race”, is best taken *cum grano salis*.

than joined together or stacked or read right to left or without vowels (like Pahlavi, Syriac, Hebrew, and Arabic). In the appendix to this essay I have performed an experiment, in order to show how much the saint's invention has given us: the song of Vahagn's birth is given in the *erkat'agir* ("iron-script", i.e., uncial) of Maštoc'; and the alphabet transmits all of the phonetic patterns and intricate poetic phraseology of the text. It is then rendered into a reconstructed, hypothetical Armenian-Aramaic heterography, where the literal sense of the *words* is preserved but nearly all the poetic detail of the *sounds* is lost.

One mentioned at the beginning of this essay that mediaeval Armenian manuscripts contain lists, also, of pictographic symbols, a number of which are quite similar in appearance to the still-undeciphered hieroglyphics of the ancient Harappan culture of the Indus Valley of the Indian subcontinent. A few of them are parallel also to RR glyphs; and this coincidence has long mesmerized the curious. Ačarean and Abrahamyan proved long ago, however, that nearly all these symbols were created as a shorthand or diversion long after the invention of the Armenian alphabet, many are based upon it, and none can be derived with certainty from the pre-Christian written or carven monuments of the country. The similarities to ancient Harappan and RR — the parallels to the latter are noted in the appendix — are entirely fortuitous: at best they merely show that people tend to see such aspects of reality as an armed man or a standing bird in much the same way even though separated by space and time.³⁰ There are only 500-odd Armenian pictograms known from the various MSS taken together, once one accounts for a few overlaps. All are explained in the manuscripts and have a very limited range of meanings (mainly religious); so we know that they were an arbitrary, synthetic list never intended to encompass all the varieties of vocabulary required for true communication in a natural language, nor were they ever employed to represent one. Some of the symbols, indeed, are mere abbreviations employing characters of the Armenian alphabet.

However on the basis of what exists I have attempted a rendering of the hymn of Vahagn, again — this time in pictographs. The best result one was able to achieve is a

³⁰ See Ačaryan 1984, pp. 411-429; and Abrahamyan 1973.

telegraphic formula, very similar to the X1 Y Z pattern Fischer discerned in the RR inscription on the Santiago staff. But for all the stark structural elegance, how much detail and nuance is lost! For example, I have compiled a register of the words that either name colors or evoke them, in the Armenian poem, all of which the pictographic rendering loses. And next to that register a list is given of the Rapanui words for colors, each of which is a metaphor dense with poetic possibilities. Though the text on cosmology from Easter Island (if that is what it is) has its own beauty, it is thanks to Maštoc' that the precious, tiny poem kept its appeal to the various senses, its multi-dimensioned richness: pictographs would have been in this instance an aid to memory shorn of most of the aestheticism, the poetics of the poem. Moreover, it is most unlikely a hieroglyphic system would have even been recoverable, had but one generation forgotten the oral texts to which the writing referred. This was, in large part, the fate of RR. The heterographic script, scarcely used in Armenia in the first place, would very likely have been abandoned in favor of Greek, Syriac, or Arabic, which are very much better suited to wide literacy and ease of communication. But the project of the Armenian alphabet was so successful that Maštoc' went on to create the Georgian and Ałuan (Caucasian Albanian) scripts.

In this Armeno-Rapanui coincidence of concise cosmological formulas there is perhaps a reflection of an archetype, not of the collective *unconscious* Jung postulated, but of man's collective *consciousness*, the art that emerges in the explanation and ordering of his world: heaven and earth and water come together and that is how fire is born. There are, apparently, three independent loci where early human cultures developed the cosmological myth, according to which light came about as the result of the separation of Heaven and Earth (which means they had been together): the largest stretches from Egypt and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean over Iran and India to China and out across Australia and Polynesia; the other two are northwestern Europe, and Central America.³¹ In Armenia Heaven and Earth labor, so does the Sea, and out comes a Man of Fire whose Eyes are Suns. On Rapanui, all the Birds mate with the Fish, and out comes the Sun. The association of birds and fish on the island may reflect particular, local circumstances: a splendid carven boulder in the collections of the Peabody Museum

³¹ Watson 2012, Map 4.

at Harvard (brought by Alexander Agassiz in 1906 from Orongo) has a petroglyph of the *tangata manu* on the front and a *pātuki* fish more crudely carved on the reverse. The researchers who noted this observe that on Rapa Nui, the Birdman motif is associated closely with fish, probably because it was the presence of sea birds that alerted the islanders to the proximity of large schools of fish coming into coastal waters.³² In Armenia, the sea out of which the fiery Vahagn bursts is Lake Van, the place where he is later to battle *višap*-dragons, seizing and hurling them into the sun.

The medieval mystic Ramon Llull believed that if he could discover a pure universal language, its clarity in the representation of reality would convince Muslim and Jewish infidels of the truth of Christianity and effect their conversion. This did not happen; and to the extent one can discover expressions among humans on planet Earth that approach the common and universal, as these varied local iterations of a cosmological formula do, they tend to describe concepts that do not have necessarily to do with the exclusive claims of a particular dogmatic faith. And only a few faiths, including Llull's, advance exclusive doctrines in any case: those of pre-Christian Armenia and Rapa Nui do not. The third expression of this same cosmological formula that I would present was intended by its author to be, not a record of the past, but a poetics of the future. In May 1872 Arthur Rimbaud wrote,

Elle est retrouvée.

Quoi? L'Éternité.

C'est la mer allée

Avec le soleil.

“She has been found again.

What? Eternity.

It is the sea, departed

³² Horley and Lee 2012, pp. 17-18. I am grateful to Dr. Susan Haskell of the Peabody Museum for this reference, a copy of the article, and her generous and gracious time and effort guiding me through the museum's extraordinarily rich and exquisite Rapa Nui collection on 29th August 2012.

With the sun.”³³

But later the poet, musing on the lines, altered them significantly in his *Alchimie du Verbe* in the cycle *Une saison en enfer, Délires II*:

Elle est retrouvée.

Quoi? L'Éternité.

C'est la mer mêlée

Au soleil.

“She has been found again.

What? Eternity.

It is the sea, **joined together**

To the sun.”

In the visionary alchemy the poet sought to work through the force of his words alone, the eternal force of life is generated, then, when the great earthly embodiments of the elements of water and fire meet in coitus together.

7. THE ARSACIDS MEET THE RAPANUI.

One cannot sail past, in approaching the end of our essay, a serendipitous correspondence— and even the former word is curiously suitable. For it derives from Sarandip, as Near Eastern voyagers called the tropical paradise in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, that is halfway from Armenia to Rapanui, a distant island yet still part of the Classical world. Readers of Vladimir Nabokov’s complex and magical novel *Pale Fire* will be familiar with the invented mirror-world of Zembla, whose name is a Westernized rendering of Russian *zemlya*, “land”. The writer discovered to his delight that the real Arctic Nova Zembla has a river named Nabokov after an ancestor. I could not help but feel a somewhat similar tingle coming upon the 102nd chapter of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). The narrator, Ishmael, visits his royal friend Tranquo; and the latter brings

³³ Starkie 1961, p. 202.

him to “a grand temple of lordly palms” sheltering the skeleton of a sperm whale, whose “vertebrae were carved with Arsacidean annals, in strange hieroglyphics.”³⁴ The incident and its details are wholly fictional; but there is a Cape of the Arsacids in Malaita province of the Solomon Islands of the South Pacific, which received its (unjust) name because of the (equally unjust) reputation of the indigenous people as assassins. The Arsacids were of course the Parthian dynasty in Armenia, one of whose last kings, Vramšapuh (whose name means Vram, i.e., Wahrām, in Arm., Vahagn, son of the king), was the patron of Maštoc’. One of Melville’s characters is a Parsi Zoroastrian, and at various points in the novel the author evinces knowledge of Near Eastern antiquity, even some familiarity with Armenia. He was of course quite knowledgeable about the Pacific and its local cultures as well. RR was the only native writing system of Polynesia; so there is a happy, strange, and singular coincidence in the American novel that in *Bend Sinister* Nabokov had correctly divined was not at all prose but a great epic poem.

8. LANDING ON ARARAT.

Armenia, endowed with a durable script and literature, was a mountain-island, perhaps, from the beginning; but as the ages past the sea around it grew wider. Iran, Syria, Anatolia, Egypt, Atropatene all embraced Islam, Crusaders came and went, the tsunamis of the Mongols, Tamerlane, the Ottomans, and the Safavids washed over the island, and in 1915, nine-tenths of historical Armenia was lost in the new inundation of Genocide. The last remnants of the nation stood at the foot of Ararat, although the mountain was in enemy hands, although the sliver of Armenia shared the difficult fate of the Soviet Union. But the script of Maštoc’ endured, and on the steps of the Matenadaran, the institute of ancient manuscripts at Erevan, the saint with his alphabet on a tablet like that of Moses gazes out over the survivor country. In 1962, Armenia celebrated his 1600th birthday, and the Soviet Armenian poet Paruyr Sevak (1924-1971) marked the occasion with the long poem *Ayr mi Maštoc’ anun* “A man, Maštoc’ by name”. According to the testimony of Agathangelos and other sources, the Zoroastrian *yazata* Tīr, with the cult epithet *erazamoyn*, meaning perhaps “dream-interpreter”, had been the scribal god and

³⁴ Melville 1964, p. 444.

psychopompos of pre-Christian Armenia. His role passed in Christian folk belief to the angel Gabriel, called the *grot*, “writer”, who comes with his list of names to a man when his time is up. Sevak contrasts the saint to the unnamed Tir:

“A god there was, but no literature.
He, faithful to his own new creed,
Chased out our false divinity of writing
And himself remained in that one’s stead.
But while our ancient scribal god
Continually performed a single task alone,
Taking men’s souls and bearing them off,
He came that he might endow us with a soul!”

Astvac kar, sakayn dprut‘yun č‘kar.
Na— havatavorn ir nor havati,
Dprut‘yan mer sut astcun vřndec‘
Ev ink‘ə mnac‘ nra p‘oxanak.
Bayc‘ minč‘ dprut‘yan hin astvacə mer
Šarunak miayn mi gorc ěr anum:
Mardkanc‘ hogin ěr ařnum u tanum—
*Sa ekav, or mez hogi pargevi!*³⁵

The poet sees the advent of Mařtoc‘ as the fulfillment of a kind of historical imperative:

“Their birth always seems, even now, unexpected,
And for centuries after leaves men constantly amazed,
Yet in life yet they are ever born for only this reason:
Beyond all measure people have awaited them.”

Nranc‘ cnundə miřt ěl t‘vum ě anspaseli
Ev heto mardkanc‘ darer řarunak zarmank‘ ě patčarum,
Bayc‘ nrank‘ kyank‘um miřt ěl cnvum en lok ayn patčarov,

³⁵ Sevak 1973, p. 257.

*Or anč‘ap‘ šat en spasel nranc‘.*³⁶

Paruyr Sevak, it was noted above, evoked Armenia as a mountain-island. His *magnum opus* is an epic poem, *Anlṙeli zangakatun* (“The bell tower that cannot be silenced”, 1959), written in commemoration of the birth of the composer and ethnomusicologist, Komitas *vardapet*, who went mad in the Genocide, died in a Paris asylum twenty years later in 1935, and was re-interred at Erevan the following year. The poetic mentor of Sevak was the Soviet Armenian poet Eḷiše Č‘arenc‘ (Yeghishe Charents). In 1936 Charents wrote a poetic *Requiem aeternam* to the memory of the composer. Charents himself was arrested and murdered by the Soviet secret police in 1937, during the Great Terror. In the 41st stanza of the poem, Charents evokes the sliver of Armenia shielded by Russia from the Genocide but ravaged in the wake of World War I by civil war, famine, and epidemics. It is an island.

“Only at the end of the land,
On the last rock left of home,
Planted like an island burning
In an ocean of blood:
On that final rock
Still escaping inundation
Despairing raved,
Still alive, our nation...”

Verjīn hoṭi vra lok,
Verjīn k‘arin hayreni,
C‘c‘vac kṭzu nman šog:
Ōvkianum aryuni,
Verjīn k‘ari vra ayd,
Deṛ mnac‘ac anotoṭ,
Zaranc‘um ēr husahat
*Mer žotoṭvurdə— deṛ oṭj...*³⁷

³⁶ Sevak 1973, p. 255.

And so we stand on Ararat.

In this study one has compared the fortunes of two isolated and challenged peoples and the way their two writing systems contributed to their cultural, even physical survival. My purpose has been to compare the paradigms of response to the convulsion of the collapse of multiple aspects of the social and spiritual world of a people, the invention of a script as a response, the creation of schools, and the rescue in literature of a cultural inheritance in Armenia, to the far less amply documented dossier of Rapa Nui. One stresses there is no relationship here, *per se*; rather, a model that may help us to understand Easter Island somewhat better than other models might do. There are, to be sure, other and durable models of the experience of Rapa Nui. The standard paradigm that comes to mind is the Cargo cult of the late-19th-century to post-World War II South Pacific: much as a Melanesian islander might construct a model of an airplane, hoping by sympathetic magic to bring back an American flier with his gifts of tinned meat and chocolate bars, the Rapanui could have invented RR to attract the mana of the Spaniards, with their ships, their wealth, and their power. There are certainly other Cargo phenomena on the island; and at many points the methodology and parameters of the Cargo cult are relevant and useful. But a characterization of this sole phenomenon of Polynesian writing *only* in the terms of the Cargo cult would miss the point, perhaps as surely as would the dismissal of Movsēs Xorenac‘i, with his rich store of native genealogy and mythography, as an erudite but historically unreliable synthesizer.³⁸ RR more sophisticated than simple magic emulation, nor was it so much an outward-directed act of sympathetic magic as an artistic, spiritual, and scholarly project whose purpose was the preservation and perpetuation, against impossible odds, in a time of severe social dislocation, of a whole culture. The Armenian model would seem a useful additional one,

³⁷ Č‘arenc‘ 1969, para. XLI.

³⁸ See the important new preface by Prof. Robert Thomson to the revised reprint of his epochal English translation, Thomson 2006, pp. ix-xvii.

to help us to understand the sophistication, magnitude, and genius (and tragedy) of RR on Rapa Nui.³⁹

I began this research by merely intending to look at the Armenian MS “hieroglyphs” and RR and set the issue to rest. But research cannot follow a predetermined course: not only must the evidence shape our conclusions, but our very argument sometimes will follow a road less taken. So I learned that RR was more than a corpus of strange symbols on inanimate boards: it was the embodiment also of the brave

³⁹ Thomas Merton, the great American Catholic monk, mystic, theologian, and poet, died in 1968 in Thailand during a trip to South and Southeast Asia. His spiritual journey in the path of Our Lord Jesus Christ had taken him far from the parochialism of the Western Church and the conservatism of dogma, to learn about Buddhism, to bear witness to the evils of racism at home and colonialism abroad, to listen to indigenous voices. He began a cycle of poems, *The Geography of Lograire*, the first volume of which was published posthumously. The mythical, global, imaginal realm was not culled from Arthurian epic but constructed from the real surname, Des Loges, of the medieval French vagabond poet François Villon. The *loges* were to evoke the lonely, simple huts of foresters. Lograire embraces Melanesia and there poems about Miklukho-Maklai in the cycle and Biblical paraphrases in the language of the Cargo cult, which Merton explained in a letter to a friend dated 27 February 1968— shortly before his untimely death. It is worth quoting here at length: “A Cargo movement is a messianic or apocalyptic cult movement which confronts a crisis of cultural change by certain magic and religious ways of acting out what seems to be the situation and trying to get with it, controlling the course of change in one’s own favor (group) or in the line of some interpretation of how things ought to be. In some sense Marxism is a kind of Cargo cult. But strictly speaking, Cargo cults are means by which primitive and underprivileged people believe they can obtain manufactured goods by an appeal to supernatural powers (ancestors, spirits, etc.) and by following a certain constant type of pattern which involves a) a complete rejection and destruction of the old culture with its goods and values b) adoption of a new attitude and hope of immediate Cargo, as a result of and reward for the rejection of the old. This always centers around some prophetic personage who brings the word, tells what is to be done, and organizes the movement. Though all this may seem naïve and absurd to western ‘civilized’ people, I, in common with some of the anthropologists, try to spell out a deeper meaning. Cargo is relevant to everyone in a way. It is a way in which primitive people not only attempt by magic to obtain the goods they feel to be unjustly denied them, but also and more importantly a way of spelling out their conception of the injustice, their sense that basic human relationships are being ignored, and their hope of restoring the right order of things. If they want Cargo it is not only because they need material things but because Cargo will establish them as equal to the white man and give them an identity as respectable as his. But if they believe in Cargo it is because they believe in their own fundamental human worth and believe it can be shown this way” (Merton 1968, pp. 148-149).

and ingenious attempts of the vivid, ever-versatile Rapanui in the wake of oblivion and destruction to create books in which they clung to the beautiful shapes of the RR glyphs. It is poignant that they could not even read these any longer, and had to resort to photographs of boards and lists by foreign savants. But they added to the books Latinized hymns and lists in their language, too— perhaps seeking thereby to unite the living voices of the texts they believed to have been recorded once in RR script, to the now mute glyphs. And as one examined the record, the energetic, tragic figure of the chief and teacher Nga'ara emerged; and there was the true heart of my story. Not a moai, but a man. He was so like my own Maštoc', whose fate could so easily have been like his; and then one saw the project, and the genius, of Maštoc' as it were with new eyes, taking nothing for granted and imagining how he performed his task, how he created a school, and what the writers of the Golden Age set down for posterity. And without him the dark waters might have risen over the snowy crown of Ararat and there would have been no Armenian book printed in 1512, or 2012. But there is, there is Sevak and Charents, and we look forward to another five hundred years of printed books, digital books, unimaginable media of the future but in a familiar alphabet that has been our ark and our time machine for sixteen centuries. And Rapa Nui ceased to be an impossibly remote, grassy, windswept hill where vast statues like denizens of another world stare into emptiness. It became a place I know, of massacre and starvation, of near extinction, of human creativity, versatility, and resurrection, of a culture returning to and rejoicing in life. It became us: for *no* man is an island, whether in the mountains or on the sea; all are a single Rapanui *taina*, an Armenian *əntanik'*, a human family.

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